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# ***THE CONTINUING LURE OF THE MEDIATED CENTRE IN TIMES OF DEEP MEDIATIZATION: “MEDIA EVENTS” AND ITS ENDURING LEGACY***

***NICK COULDRY and ANDREAS HEPP***

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## ***Abstract:***

***Dayan and Katz’s book “Media Events” was so crucial because it challenged the dominance of quantitative communications research focussed on measurable discrete ‘media effects’. But meanwhile new challenges have emerged which we called ‘deep mediatization’ – datafication, deeper fragmentation of the audience, and over the longer-term threats to the underlying economic viability of the large-scale integrated media producers that could put on ‘media events’. This makes it necessary to re-think the original definition of media events.***

***Keywords: media events, deep mediatization, datafication, fragmentation***

The place of *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* in the history of media and communications research is assured. For one of the present authors (Nick), Dayan and Katz’s book was the work, along with Jesus Martín-Barbero’s *Communication Culture and Hegemony*, that in 1994 convinced him to attempt doctoral research. For the other (Andreas), this book was around 2000 together with Néstor Garcia Canclini’s (2004) *Hybrid Cultures* a major reference point to rethink how media cultures transform with globalised media landscapes. But the important question, since our field addresses an ever-changing empirical reality, goes beyond history: what matters is to know whether and why, ‘media events’ remains a ‘live’ concept for researching the broadest social and political consequences of media and communications infrastructures and institutions. We are clear that it does.

Dayan and Katz’s book was so crucial because it challenged the dominance of quantitative communications research focussed on measurable discrete ‘media effects’. It proposed that the many aspects of media (production, distribution, reception, subsequent commentary) could, under certain conditions, come together in a social and political *form*, the media event, which was both clearly distinct, yet had consequences (constitutive consequences for politics and public life in particular) that could not be reduced to linear functions. In this sense, Dayan and Katz offered the first rigorous application of James Carey’s insistence (1989) on the importance of the ritual dimension of communication. But they did so in a way that drew richly on a range of disciplines – history, political science, anthropology, semiotics, literary theory – and offered a multitude of concrete examples. *Media Events* took to the highest level the cross-*disciplinary* approach to the significance of media in everyday life for which others were also calling in the early 1990s (Morley, 1992; Silverstone, 1994). The book offers an enduring example of how theory can be integrated with empirical analysis in the field of communications, and in ways that speak to the wider social sciences and humanities.

At the same time, for all its virtues and practical successes, Dayan and Katz’s book worked to affirm the integrative potential of national societies and national media systems’ role within them, drawing on the functionalist line of thinking about society most interestingly developed by Emile Durkheim (2005). This was an underlying problem with the

media events thesis, which each of us, then quite independently, noted and developed through sympathetic critique (Couldry, 2003; Hepp, 2004, 2015). Our goal was to preserve what was most important in the media events concept (and the approach to media analysis that it represented), while extracting it from a functionalist way of thinking about society and media that had always involved difficulties (Lukes, 1975; Couldry, 2005). Our concerns were as much those long-term problems with functionalism as the specific challenges to the media events concept that emerged with the shift away from ‘media scarcity’ to ‘media plenty’ in the age of the internet (Ellis, 2000). But those latter problems were destined to grow.

By the end of the decade, the proliferation of media flows and the epochal re-purposing of media resources by external actors (the 9/11 attacks) had destabilised two things: national media systems’ ability to secure national attention to mediated events, and the exclusive control of states over the media resources of their territories (Hepp, 2015: 168–178). Both Dayan (2010) and Katz (Katz and Liebes, 2010) argued, in response, that the possibility of media events in the strict sense was challenged. Our response, as ‘critical friends’ of the concept, was to argue that it was the functionalist trappings of the concept that needed, once and for all, to be dropped, leaving a concept that was extremely well suited to grasping the continuing pressures to *construct* a (social, political, national or even global) ‘centre’ through the managed output of media institutions (Couldry and Hepp, 2010). We still believe that here lies the contribution of the ‘media events’ concept: to point us, in particular form, towards a key feature of media as institutions to whom, as Luc Boltanski put it (albeit with other institutions in mind), is ‘delegated the task of stating the whatness of what is’ (Boltanski, 2011: 75). Put more bluntly, ‘media events’ remains an essential concept for grasping one principal spatial and temporal form that symbolic power takes in a world-system of complex national societies.

But meanwhile new challenges have emerged which we called ‘deep mediatization’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 7, 28–33) – datafication, deeper fragmentation of the audience, and over the longer-term threats to the underlying economic viability of the large-scale integrated media producers that could put on ‘media events’. If we think already about the Olympics in UK in 2012, we can only understand this event as a *media* event if we have its construction across a wide variety of digital media in mind. The British opening ceremony and its subsequent reporting demonstrated the degree to which this was very much a cross-media undertaking, since the media event did not only thicken the produced media of television, radio and newspaper. Other digital media were deployed in the construction of the event, so that, for instance, Twitter was used to keep people updated, with Twitter and emailed comments being streamed as part of the official reporting. How centralized this remained is shown by Rupert Murdoch’s Twitter feed. This not only had 300 000 followers at the time of the games but his Tweets were used as part of the commentary in the BBC’s coverage of the opening ceremony as a key source for the reaction of the press. (See on this <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19025686>, accessed November 23, 2014.)

This brings us to the complexity of media events nowadays: whether they are sports events or terror attacks, their construction does not only take place cross-media. *Because* of the heavy use of digital platforms and other kinds of digital media, processes of datafication now matter. The question becomes striking as to which ‘digital traces’ are left when communicating about the event and to what extent these traces themselves become part of constructing media events. Furthermore, as the construction of media events is also a question of ‘size’ and ‘reach’ the analysis of such traces is an issue for the media coverage about the events itself. It is only a question of time until some forms of ‘algorithmic

journalism' (Anderson, 2012) or, even more fundamentally, 'algorithmic constructions of reality' (Loosen and Scholl, 2017) become part of constructing media events. This means to rethink the articulation of these events even further. As media events, they will remain somehow 'centralising' and related to questions of power; however, to analyse the underlying forces means also to reflect the role of data and algorithms in new ways. This will become a major challenge for any future research on media events.

These observations bring us back to our definition of media events as certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core (Hepp and Couldry, 2010: 12). Media events are thus able to bind people from different social and cultural backgrounds into a complex process of communication. This works through a wide range of representations that are anything but (globally) homogeneous and free of contradiction. The transculturally binding element of these prominent media events should therefore be viewed rather differently: across cultures they make clear that the cross-cultural 'central' events are those that are widely communicated cross-media and in a digital environment. This is true not only of mass media, but also of more recent digital media, which are themselves extensively bound into media events. In this sense, therefore, media events are, at the level of representation, the insignia of contemporary globalization and deep mediatization.

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